



House of Cards

In my family, keeping a secret is a simple trick.

By Kevin Gray

Any excuse for a reunion and my family holds one. They lay out the ziti in 20-pound trays. They park their cars on the neighbor's grass. Dads with their pale legs showing sip vodkas and admire the grill. Elderly aunts wave tissues against the heat. So it was at my cousin's 30th-birthday party, held deep in the work-boot suburbs of Connecticut. I'm not a fan of these functions, though I feel compelled to add that it's not because I don't love my family. It's my family's secrets that trouble me, the way we bury our mistakes in silence, rewrite our private shames through public denial.

Midway through the day, I sat down next to Chris, a round-faced 11-year-old boy with a black bowl cut. I hadn't seen him in a couple of years, since the funeral of his father, Anthony. He'd been like an older brother to me when I was young, and then, at 36, he died of heart failure. I delivered the eulogy.

Two years hadn't changed Chris much. Shy and freckled, with long lashes and a polite smile, he avoided his rowdy cousins, who were tossing footballs and whacking badminton birdies at their sisters. As his mother and I talked over plates of ziti, Chris tried to interest us in some dime-store magic tricks — pulling silk hankies from his chubby fist, or asking me to pick a card from an outstretched deck.

Chris had never lived with his father; in fact, he'd barely even known him. So a week after Anthony's funeral, his mother told me, she decided to give Chris a keepsake from his father's closet. Not just any keepsake, though. She gave him Anthony's baseball bat. As she told me this a sly look passed over her face, and we shared a dark laugh.

I don't know what stories Chris may have constructed about his dad, but Anthony didn't play baseball. He owned the bat for other reasons. The hero of my adolescence, the fast-talking, good-looking charmer with David Cassidy hair and black outlaw eyes, Anthony disintegrated in adulthood, turning, sadly, into a criminal and a crackhead. Ten years before his death, a jailhouse beating triggered an aneurysm, which paralyzed half his body. After that, he slept with the bat by his side, to defend himself from drug dealers, who had twice broken into his home and beaten him up for unpaid debts.

The bat his son now owned carried powerful secrets: its secret life as a weapon, the secret history of his father's addic-

tion, even the secret of how we, as a family, may have failed Anthony. I began to wonder if these truths would come out, at what age, and what they might mean to Chris. Meanwhile, Chris took a pen from his pocket. He told me to write my name on the card, then slip it back in the deck. He shuffled it behind his back. Then he handed me a card face down and asked triumphantly, "Is that the one?" I hesitated. "No," I said, feeling disappointed for him.

He produced three more cards and grew increasingly frustrated each time he was wrong. His mother only smiled. As it wore on, the exercise made me nervous. I wanted it to stop. I wanted to lie and say brightly, "Yup, that's it." But, of course, I couldn't. My name was on the card.

Standing there next to Chris and his mother, I remembered what it was like when, late in his life, Anthony showed up at these picnics. He'd be nervous and pasty, but we'd pretend not to notice, chatting desperately about the weather, sports, whatever. And we're still chatting past truths. It wasn't long ago that the woman over by the barbecue — self-starved, alcoholic and depressed — had lain down in the middle of an Interstate. (A motorist spotted her in time and rescued her.) She's been sober for two years now, but as I greeted her that afternoon, I didn't mention the transformation. Instead, I hugged her and said, "You look great." Best to act as if it never happened.

But then what choice was there, really? And what was there to tell Chris about his father that would be of any help to the boy? I had always figured there'd be time for that later, but as Chris flipped card after card, I realized the time to tell secrets had passed. It would most likely be a couple more years until I saw him again. Who knows what he will learn by then. I pictured him, on a schoolyard play field somewhere in Connecticut, facing down a fastball with a crack bat. It was an odd little secret I could live with.

Chris's trick, meanwhile, was winding down, and not in a good way. He hadn't been able to produce the card with my name on it. And my cheery attempts to distract him from this fact were wearing thin. "Hang on a minute," Chris said, fishing in his pocket. "I usually carry a spare." He pulled out a little wooden box, slid the top along its grooves and removed a card, folded in four squares. "That it?" he said.

I opened it and found my name, just as I'd written it. Chris grinned, satisfied with his trick, and moved on to try it on another relative. ■